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ZNR UUUUU ZZH

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FM AMCONSUL CHENNAI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2373

INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3765

RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 CHENNAI 000223

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV KDEM KBIO IN

SUBJECT: THE SONS ALSO RISE: KARUNANIDHI KEEPS POWER IN THE FAMILY

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi consolidated his family's hold over the DMK party in the wake of its surprisingly strong performance in the national elections. Karunanidhi signaled that his son Stalin is his heir apparent by naming him Deputy Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. At the same time, Karunanidhi installed his older son Azhagiri as a Union Minister, where he will be the DMK's power broker in New Delhi. Regardless of whether these moves make for a smooth succession as intended, the DMK will be much weaker when the physically ailing octogenarian Karunanidhi leaves the political scene because neither son is capable of filling his shoes. End summary.

A complicated first family

¶2. (SBU) Tamil Nadu's octogenarian Chief Minister, M. Karunanidhi, has a big family to take care of. He has married three times. His first wife, Padma, died young. A son from that marriage, Muthu, remained estranged from his father for a long time, hobnobbing with Karunanidhi's political foes after an unsuccessful attempt at a film career. Karunanidhi is still married to his second wife, Dayalu, with whom he has three sons (Azhagiri, Stalin, Tamilarasu) and a daughter (Selvi). Karunanidhi also has an "unofficial wife," Rajathi, with whom he has a daughter, Kanimozhi. (This sort of marital arrangement is fairly common among Tamils of Karunanidhi's generation, and it is not considered a potential source of scandal. He regularly includes them both in public events and official travel.) The two live in separate houses in Chennai, and he divides his time between them.

¶3. (SBU) Karunanidhi has long dominated Tamil Nadu's politics. He is the unquestioned leader of the DMK, a regional Tamil party with no obvious ideology other than support for Karunanidhi and a desire to remain in power. (It originated as part of the "Dravidian Movement" that opposed the domination of South India by Hindi speakers based in New Delhi, but this is no longer a burning issue.) Its main goal is to retain control of Tamil Nadu, where it has generally alternated terms of government there with its arch-rival AIADMK. Its secondary goal is to remain part of the national government, a goal made easier by the party's ideological malleability, which allows it to join national governments led by the Congress Party, the BJP, or almost anybody else.

The Chosen One

¶4. (SBU) Three of Karunanidhi's children are politically active: Stalin (Deputy Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu), Azhagiri (Union Minister for Chemicals and Fertilizers), and Kanimozhi (Member of the Rajya Sabha, India's upper house of parliament). It is generally accepted that Karunanidhi wants Stalin to succeed him as head of the DMK and as Chief Minister, but the rivalry between Stalin and his older brother Azhagiri is legendary. Stalin arose as an early favorite, having been active in the party since the 1970s beginning by organizing its youth wing. He gained widespread recognition in the state when he was jailed, along with other political leaders, from 1976-77 under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act, during "The Emergency" declared by Indira Gandhi.

15. (SBU) Stalin had something of a thuggish reputation in the 1970s, including alleged involvement in multiple sex scandals. (Many in Chennai still tell stories, perhaps apocryphal, of pretty girls being plucked off the streets and handed over to Stalin for his amusement.) He matured and shed this image in the late 1980s, however, evolving into a genuinely popular politician, winning election to the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly four times (1989, 1996, 2001 and 2006), and serving as Mayor of Chennai from 1996 to 2002. He was also the state's Minister for Local Administration and Rural Development from 2006 until becoming Deputy Chief Minister in 2009, a new position in the state's government created especially for him.

Not so fast, says the big brother

16. (SBU) Stalin's older brother, Azhagiri, recently named India's Minister for Chemicals and Fertilizers, remains a controversial figure. His rivalry with Stalin is legendary in Tamil Nadu. After years of feuding, Karunanidhi sent him in 1989 to the city of Madurai, hundreds of miles away from Chennai in southern Tamil Nadu, ostensibly to take care of the party newspaper, but more with a view toward avoiding clashes between the sons. In Madurai, he controlled DMK efforts in Tamil Nadu's southern districts even though he did not hold an official position of any sort within the party. His conflicts with senior DMK leaders in Madurai created trouble for the party during Karunanidhi's 1996-2001 term as Chief Minister. At one point, the DMK's General Secretary, evidently directed by Karunanidhi, even issued an order to party workers to avoid associating with Azhagiri altogether. The feuding continued and Azhagiri reportedly worked to defeat many DMK candidates in the 2001

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Assembly elections that threw the party out of power.

17. (SBU) Azhagiri's notoriety extends past the usual political theatrics. In May 2003, Tamil Nadu police arrested Azhagiri for criminal conspiracy and murder in a case relating to the stabbing death of T. Kiruttinan, a senior DMK leader and former state-level minister and Member of Parliament. Prosecutors charged that Azhagiri conspired to have Kiruttinan murdered because he was challenging Azhagiri's control of the DMK's leadership in the state's southern districts. Karunanidhi, however, claimed that the arrest was a political vendetta by Chief Minister Jayalalithaa (his arch-rival who had taken over in Tamil Nadu when her AIADMK party won the legislative assembly elections in 2001). In May 2008, the presiding judge in the case acquitted Azhagiri and the 12 others indicted in the case, declaring the state's allegations "not proved."

18. (SBU) At least one other major violent incident is linked to Azhagiri and his cronies. In 2007, Azhagiri's supporters attacked and burned the Dinakaran newspaper office in Madurai, killing three employees. The attack followed the paper's publication of a survey showing that Stalin was much more popular than Azhagiri. Sixteen people, including a police officer, were charged in the incident. Azhagiri, however, was not among the accused.

Money powers Azhagiri's southern successes

19. (SBU) Azhagiri's political fortunes truly began to rise after he helped the DMK-led alliance win three legislative assembly by-elections in a row in 2006, 07 and 09. In addition to mobilizing an army of fully committed party workers, Azhagiri had the DMK pay cash bribes to lure voters on a scale never seen before in Tamil Nadu. Even the DMK's opponents grudgingly admired the breadth and brazenness of Azhagiri's cash-for-votes distribution network. After ensuring a DMK victory in the 2009 by-election, which was seen as a bellwether for the upcoming national elections, Azhagiri assumed his first-ever official position in the party. Karunanidhi then gave him the ticket to contest to the Madurai Lok Sabha seat, as well as the responsibility to supervise the DMK's efforts to win the 10 Lok Sabha constituencies of southern Tamil Nadu. The party went on to win nine of the ten constituencies, beating the multi-party

coalition led by the AIADMK.

Cabinet berth for Azhagiri, Deputy CM post for Stalin

¶10. (SBU) After protracted negotiations between Karunanidhi and Congress leadership in New Delhi, Congress ultimately allotted three Ministries to the DMK. Azhagiri was sworn in as Union Minister for Fertilizers and Chemicals on May 28. The very next day, Karunanidhi promoted Stalin to Deputy Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. The twin promotions cleverly advanced Karunanidhi's plan to have Stalin eventually succeed him. Stalin's elevation buttresses the widespread understanding that he is the heir apparent. As Deputy Chief Minister Stalin will have responsibility for a number of portfolios that his father previously handled including the Departments of General Administration, Industries, District Revenue Offices, Minorities Welfare, Social Reforms, and Special Initiatives. At the same time, Karunanidhi placated the volatile Azhagiri with the prestige and privileges that accompany his new status as a Minister in the central government. Moreover, installing Azhagiri in New Delhi, more than a thousand miles away from Chennai, helps reduce the possibility of a clash over succession in the event the fading Karunanidhi dies.

Daughter disappointed at being left out of Cabinet

¶11. (SBU) Another family member, Karunanidhi's grand-nephew Dayanidhi Maran, was made the Union Minister for Textiles. The final DMK ministerial post was given to A. Raja, who kept his post as Minister for Communications and Information Technology. This left Kanimozhi, Karunanidhi's daughter by his "unofficial wife," out in the cold despite heavy lobbying by her supporters. Sources close to Kanimozhi told us that she remains deeply upset at being denied a cabinet position. According to local journalists, she is expecting a promotion in the party to compensate for it.

Will Karunanidhi retire soon?

¶12. (SBU) It is not clear whether his decision to elevate Stalin signals Karunanidhi's intent to retire from active politics soon. A media contact told post that Karunanidhi has no intention of stepping down, but a source close to Stalin suggested the Chief Minister might retire in the near future. After a spinal cord surgery in February, Karunanidhi has been in pain and wheelchair-bound. Stalin's health condition is unclear: he is

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rumored to be suffering from an undisclosed ailment (allegedly intestinal cancer). He visited London in June 2008, reportedly for a medical examination.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) Karunanidhi's efforts to forestall a succession fight by dividing political turf between Azhagiri and Stalin will likely fail. Azhagiri, who speaks little English and no Hindi, will have difficulty in the New Delhi political scene. He is at heart very much a provincial Tamil Nadu politician, who will no doubt want to contest for power in the state once his father leaves the scene. This will put him at odds with Stalin, who compensates for his lack of charisma with a willingness to work hard and to listen to the advice of trusted bureaucrats and senior party leaders. Stalin, anointed by Karunanidhi, is likely to come out on top because he is more acceptable than his pugnacious and rough-hewn brother. Neither, however, has the political acumen or rhetorical skills to fill the shoes of the father who has dominated the state's politics for four decades. The DMK will be in for hard times whenever Karunanidhi finally does get out of politics. End comment.

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